

The Will to Fight – Evaluation of Dutch Morale Research during Several Missions Since 1997

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...`Why are you doing it? Are you some war junky?`

`It's about the men next to you, that's all there is.`

Mark Bowden, Black Hawk Down

WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO THE WILL TO FIGHT?

Every commander tries to accomplish his/ her mission by applying a contribution to a military product, called military capacity or fighting power. This military product contains 3 components. These are the conceptual component, the physical component and the mental component.

The mental component can be described, as 'the will to fight' and contains three major aspects: leadership, motivation and military conduct.

Military literature and my own experience shows that it's more difficult to assess the quality of leadership, cohesion, hardiness etc within a unit, in contrast to the conceptual and the physical component.

In 1997 the BSSC (Behavioural Sciences Services Centre) developed a morale questionnaire to support commanders to measure mental elements and to give them advice to improve. This morale research has been developed and improved, resulting in the product the BSSC now works with.

The Dutch definition of morale is; the mental state of the individual soldier, in a task oriented group, in relation to maintaining the assignment and the operational tasks his group stands for.

In 2001 the questionnaire has been evaluated and validated. In 2005 the BSSC conducted a second evaluation using interviews with several commanders who have been served in Iraq, Bosnia and Afghanistan between 2003 and spring 2005. The goal of this evaluation was to check the quality of the Dutch morale research and the process. It also gave the possibility to collect opinions of commanders and to find out if the product still covers the needs of the commanders concerning this subject. The third goal was to do an inventory which other needs there are among the commanders concerning research of the mental component in general. The aim of this article is to inform about the meaning commanders have concerning morale and the process used by the BSSC.

Eimers-van Nes, R. (2006) The Will to Fight – Evaluation of Dutch Morale Research during Several Missions Since 1997. In *Human Dimensions in Military Operations – Military Leaders' Strategies for Addressing Stress and Psychological Support* (pp. 27-1 – 27-10). Meeting Proceedings RTO-MP-HFM-134, Paper 27. Neuilly-sur-Seine, France: RTO. Available from: <http://www.rto.nato.int/abstracts.asp>.

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 01 APR 2006		2. REPORT TYPE N/A		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Will to Fight Evaluation of Dutch Morale Research during Several Missions Since 1997				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Behavioural Sciences Services Centre Ministry of Defence The Hague THE NETHERLANDS				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES See also ADM001955., The original document contains color images.					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 10	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Why morale research

High morale seems to be vitally important in keeping stress casualties minimal and is necessary for success in wartime (Manning, 1991). Despite the importance of high morale it is very hard to measure throughout history it got varying degrees of attention (Tibboel, Van Tintelen, Swanenberg & van de Ven, 2000).

The Dutch Defence Doctrine shows the importance of morale by describing the three components that contribute to military fighting power. The physical, conceptual and mental components contribute to the military fighting power.

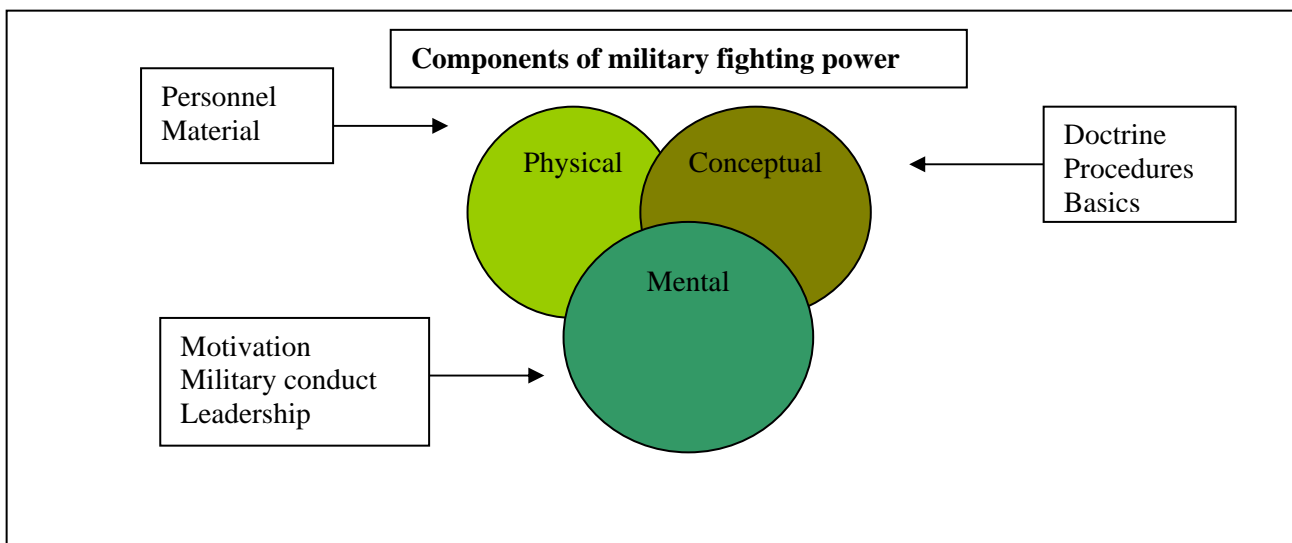


Figure 1 Model of the components of military fighting power

The physical and conceptual components are not the subjects of this paper. The mental component can be seen as the 'will to fight' and contains motivation, leadership, cohesion, trust, discipline etc. These elements are part of the Dutch morale Questionnaire that had been developed in the late nineties.

In the early nineties the Royal Netherlands army (RNLA) sent troops to Bosnia and started to develop new interest in measuring and influencing morale. For that matter in 1995 there was a restart of developing a Dutch morale-questionnaire based on the Israeli and American morale research (Vullingsh, 1996). In 1997 the morale questionnaire was used for the first time. In 2001 it has been evaluated and validated. In 2005 the morale research has been evaluated for a second time with the focus on three aspects. The first aspect was to evaluate the quality of the product itself. The second aspect was to check if the demands of units on missions match with the content of the research. The last aspect contains several recommendations derived from the results of the evaluation not directly related to the morale research itself.

1.2 Paper structure

In chapter 2 a description of the morale research is given, starting with the definition of morale and the aim of the morale research. The content of the questionnaire is described and this chapter concludes with the procedures of the Dutch morale research. In chapter 3 the results of the evaluation, recently held by the Dutch BSSC, are presented. This chapter is divided in the aim, the structure and the results of the evaluation. In the last chapter several recommendations are presented.

2.0 THE DUTCH MORALE RESEARCH

The first Dutch morale research was used in 1997 during several missions in Bosnia. At this moment the research takes place in Bosnia and Afghanistan. In the nineties the research has been used in the Netherlands Army. In 2005 the instrument was also introduced within the Royal Netherlands Air force and in 2006 the instrument will be transformed in a useful tool for in The Royal Netherlands Navy. In this chapter the aim, procedure and the questionnaire will be described.

2.1 Definition of morale

Before the aim of the morale research is given, it is necessary to describe the definition of morale. In the literature morale has been defined in several ways. The U.S. army defines morale as the mental, emotional and spiritual state of the individual. It is how he feels –happy, hopeful, confident, appreciated, worthless, unrecognised or depressed (Manning, 1991). This definition shows morale as a sort of synonym for happiness. Another definition from earlier times emphasises the role of the soldier within the group he works in. Munson (1921) defined morale as the determination to succeed in the purpose for which the individual is trained or which the group exists. Several other definitions are mentioned in the literature but most researchers agree on the fact that morale strongly connects with aspects like cohesion, motivation, satisfaction and other personal related aspects. Based on literature, the BSSC uses the following definition of morale:

‘Morale is a mental attitude held by an individual soldier in a task oriented group in relation to achieve the operational objectives for which the group exists’ (Van Gelooven et al, 1997).

This definition implicates that morale is a mental state, which is not directly observable. Morale is a characteristic of an individual in a group. The height of morale of individuals defines the morale of the group. Morale is connected to the targets the group stands for. (Van Gelooven et al, 1997).

2.2 Aim of the Dutch morale research

The aim of the Dutch morale research is to provide insights about morale and how to improve it. A unit with high morale performs consistently at a high level of efficiency, each group member is aware of his responsibilities and acts that way, if necessary they help each other even without asking. They are often proud of their work and their group. They, who don’t confirm, feel the pressure of the group and success is not a surprise but a logical outcome of their efforts (Manning, 1991).

To achieve these goals, a questionnaire and oral evaluations are used to assist the commander to figure out if and which problems exist within his unit and to formulate interventions to improve morale.

2.3 The morale questionnaire

The Dutch morale questionnaire developed by Van de Bos, Tibboel & Willigenburg (1994) is based on several international models. The model consists of factors distinguished by Gal (1986) and Mangelsdorff, King & O’Brien (1985).

The simplified model is shown in figure 2. This model shows that leadership, unit aspects, organisational aspects, environment aspects, individual and personal aspects influence the level of morale.

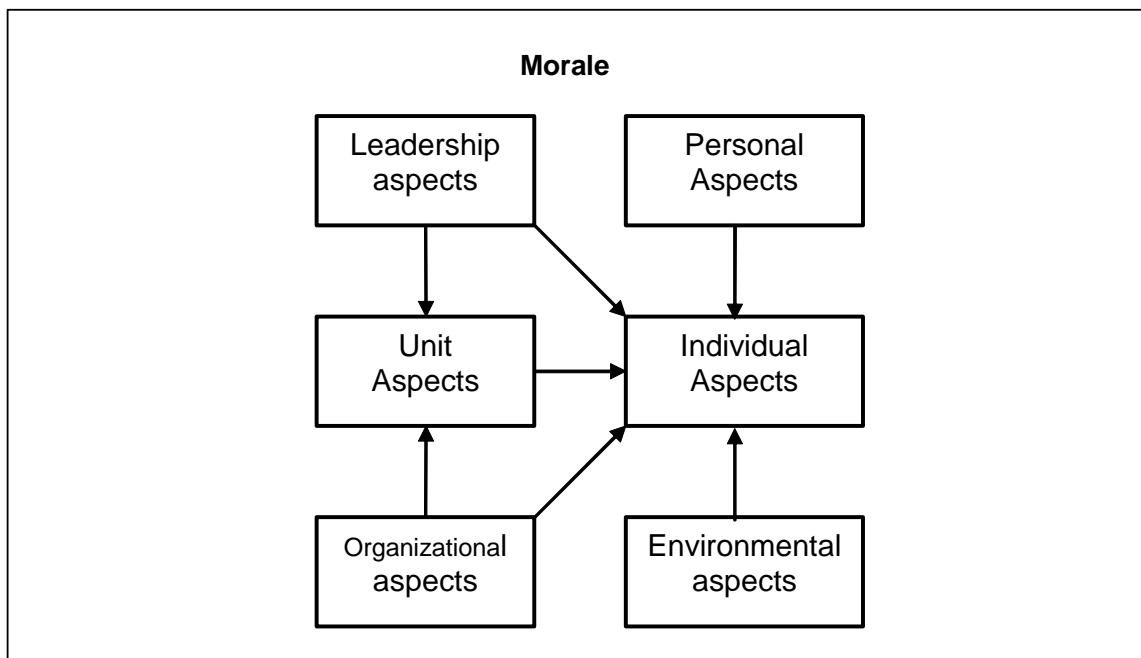


Figure 2. Simplified version of the model

Leadership is measured on group, platoon and team-level. The importance of good leadership is no point of discussion. Personal characteristics of the leader, professionalism, integrity, model behaviour and patience influence trust of group-members in their leader and is directly related to morale.

Unit aspects are divided in unit cohesion, unit-identification and respect. Cohesion is a major factor in relation to morale. In cases of high cohesion membership of a group maintains longer, there is greater participation, good communication and members feel more secure (Van Gelooven et al, 1997). However more recent research shows that strong cohesion also could have negative consequences. That's the case when failures are covered by group-members out of solidarity (Flache, 2003). Group-pressure could also outplace group-members who don't follow the group-rules (Soeters, 2004). Nevertheless there is no doubt that the influence of cohesion on morale is very important. Unit-identification and respect are also related to cohesion and are for that reason also important to morale.

Organisational aspects are the appreciation of the military environment, familiarity with assignment and terrain and perceived organisational support. During military operations normal living standards are not always common. Shortages in supplies, ammunition, bad weather circumstances influence morale in the long term and should be taken in to account. Also knowledge of the assignment and the terrain conditions reduce uncertainty and increase self-confidence. Data analysis has shown that perceived organisational support contributes organisational citizen behaviour.

Trusting and being trusted promotes dedication and discipline and helps military personnel to function under difficult circumstances. Home front support is very important and influences self-confidence reduces uncertainty, the level of fear and motivation. Job characteristics, motivation and satisfaction are strongly connected and related to morale. Organisational citizen behaviour is shown in situations where group-members fulfil tasks without getting orders. They show extra-role behaviour without expecting rewards. This behaviour is linked to cohesion and raises the efficiency and effectiveness of a unit (Organ, 1988). Individual aspects are trust, home front support, job satisfaction and organisational citizen behaviour.

Concerning the personal aspects some questions are asked about age, unit, rank, sex and level of education. These questions are asked because every individual soldier contributes to morale in his own way, for example because of his age, military experience and experience in humanitarian missions (Labuc, 1991).

2.4 Structure of the morale research

The Dutch morale research contains of three measurements:

- a. The first measurement just before operational deployment (approx. 1 month)
- b. The second measurement during the deployment (halfway)
- c. The third measurement in the last month of the mission (not always necessary).

The first contact with the unit is a responsibility of the BSSC. During this first contact several appointments are made and an introduction takes place. For every measurement the same questionnaire is used. The results of every measurement are only fed back to the direct commander of the team. No one else has access to the results without direct permission of the commander him/ herself.

3.0 EVALUATION OF MORALE RESEARCH

3.1 Aim of the evaluation

The evaluation of the Dutch morale research in 2005 was not focussed on the scientific quality of the questionnaire. The evaluation was more related to the opinion of the commanders who have been participated in the research during several missions in the last 3 years. The aim of the evaluation was threefold. First aspect was to investigate the satisfaction of the commanders about the research as a whole. This was also asked at the end of the research itself, but in this setting it's at least a few months ago they took part in the research. Second was to investigate if the research covers the needs of the commanders concerning their needs according to morale. The third subject was to collect comments not directly related to the morale research itself and to formulate recommendations according the overall service of the BSSC.

3.2 Structure of the evaluation

The evaluation of the Dutch morale Research was integrated in the interviews about psychological support during missions initiated by the NATO workgroup 'HFM 081, Psychological Support in Modern Military Operations'. This workgroup developed a questionnaire about psychological support during missions and asked their members to interview commanders and bring the results together in one report. In this NATO HFM-081 RTG 020 questionnaire the questions of the Dutch morale research were integrated

In the Netherlands commanders were asked if they wanted to participate in the interview. Fifteen interviews took place, every time with 2 interviewers of BSSC. Five captains, 1 colonel, 4 lt-colonels and 5 majors were interviewed. All had been in command of a company or a battalion during their last mission. The mission areas they talked about were Bosnia and Iraq. For 3 of the commanders this mission was the first one. Six commanders had been on earlier missions before the latest one. Three commanders went on their third mission and three of them went for the fourth time. Most experiences were picked up during missions in Bosnia in the last decade. The commanders had an average of 20 years of military experience. They were responsible for a group of people with a minimum of 65 and a maximum of 1450 persons.

The questions, asked in the interview concerning the Dutch morale research, were divided in 4 questions about the procedure of the research, 2 questions about the quality of the questionnaire, 4 questions about the results of the questionnaire and 3 questions about the value of the Dutch morale research as a whole. Finally 3 questions were added about services of the BSSC in general. The results of the interviews are categorised in the same way the questions are described in the text above.

3.3 Procedure

BSSC used different ways to introduce the Dutch morale research. Some were contacted by Email and others were contacted by phone, sometimes reaction time was short. But they were all very busy with the preparation of the mission while first contact with the BSSC took place. Most commanders were satisfied with the first contact and the introduction. The explanation was often clear for everyone. Negative comments were few, but 2 commanders were not satisfied, because the introduction was not clear enough and it seemed to them that the research came 'out of the blue'.

The introduction of the Dutch Morale Research always takes place during a very busy time for units. The first measurement takes place during the final exercise. At that moment most people are gathered together (often for the first time). The ideal moment for introduction and the first measurement is very hard to define. Several commanders are satisfied the way it has been done. Others want a more periodical way of measurement, not only related to a mission. Few commanders want a different measurement for the organic unit and another measurement for all units and personnel that is placed just before the mission. Another point of discussion is whether the first measurement should take place before or during the final exercise.

Three respondents took part in the research because they were told to do so but they were all satisfied afterwards. Most respondents wanted to use everything they could to improve the quality of their unit and some others mentioned that the information from the research was bottom-up and very useful to detect the weak spots in the morale of the unit.

They were also asked if they were satisfied with the number of measurements. Most of them were satisfied with 2 measurements. They considered the third measurement as useless because the unit usually falls apart after returning to the home bases. Two respondents added that the measurements should not be focussed on a specific mission. It's more useful to measure annually to get a steady insight in the morale of the unit during the whole year. This way a 'first' measurement is not necessary anymore because there are always data present of that specific unit.

3.4 Questionnaire

Most commanders were satisfied with the overall quality of the questionnaire. In some cases in the first questionnaires there were some details wrong. In 3 cases the questionnaire was not related enough to the specific task of the unit and it's way of acting. In 1 case several mistakes had happened in both measurements and the quality was bad.

Commanders were also asked if they heard some comments during the administration of the questionnaires. Half of the commanders had heard no comments. Some had heard about the 'questionnaire-fatigue' of the soldiers because they are overloaded with questionnaires about all kind of subjects. This is a problem of the Netherlands forces as a whole. People try to concentrate research as much as possible but it's very difficult to control the amount of questionnaires within the several army units. Another comment was that some soldiers had problems to answer specific questions because they live in their own world and haven't much interest in questions about morale.

3.5 Results of morale research

The commanders were asked 4 questions about the results of the measurements. They were all satisfied with the way the results were reported and the fact that researchers came to the mission-area to explain the results. The explanation was in all cases objective and even more advice was desirable. In some cases the researchers are used for coaching and advising about all mental aspects concerning the well being of the unit. Other commanders used the researchers to ask them for advice about their own acting as a unit-commander.

As mentioned before, the results are only reported to the commander of the unit under investigation. Half of the respondents are satisfied with this. Three of them wanted the results also to be reported to their commander. Another two wanted the results going to those persons who could influence the aspects where complaints were about. For instance the quality of food or the supplies of the base shop. These aspects are not under control of the unit-commander and they could use some help to improve these aspects. Three other commanders wanted the choice of publishing the results left up to the decision themselves.

Half of the commanders didn't make interventions after the results were presented. In some cases there was no reason because of the good results. In other cases time was too short to intervene or other unit specific reasons were mentioned. Most of the commanders mentioned that the results were no surprise and some had intervened already. The results of the measurement were used as a conformation of earlier observations. The other half used several interventions depending on the points of attention based on the results.

Commanders were asked if they needed additional support of the BSSC. Ten respondents were satisfied with the support they had received but had no needs for further support. Five others wanted more support. Their intentions were different. One commander wanted structural support and combined this need with the annual measurement (see also paragraph 3.1). One commander pleaded for more tools to handle relation-dedicated leadership. The other three wanted support if they needed it without the connection to missions.

3.6 Overall quality of the Dutch Morale research

All commanders were very satisfied with the instrument and recommended continuing the research.. If they were asked again to participate in the morale research during a next mission they all will accept. One commander mentioned to consider the duration of the mission. If the mission is short it is difficult to make interventions because time is short. This problem exists when missions last three months. Another commander was willing to accept the next time if the introduction was better and the questionnaire was more dedicated to the specific tasks of the unit.

The answers, about which improvements should be made, contained various elements. Four commanders focussed on details in the questionnaire and in the way appointments have to be made about moments of measurement. Four commanders mentioned also to execute the research periodically and not focus on a mission. This way a unit-commander has more time to interfere and doesn't 'lose' quality time during the preparation for the mission. At that moment he already knows the morale status of his unit. The commanders also asked for more practical tools in case improvements should be made. They want more advice and opportunity to ask the researchers what to do in specific cases.

3.7 Service of the BSSC

During this part of the interview three other questions were asked. First they were asked if they need more support from the BSSC. Their answers contain 4 major aspects. There is a desire for a detailed report about trends during the missions that took place until now. They also mentioned that it's lonely at the top and there is a need for more personal advice and possibilities to reflect. It's important the researchers

involved have enough experience and possibilities to project oneself in the position of the commander. That way the researchers could raise their contribution and fill in an unfulfilled need of a lot of commanders. One commander asked if it's possible to use the morale data to predict the chance soldiers will suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder. Finally it was suggested that the BSSC might develop a competence model for good leadership to influence the choice of the right people in the right places.

The second question was about the use of mental effectivity measures by the commanders to examine the mental state of their unit. This question was hard to answer but most of the commanders use common sense. Other possible effectivity measures like atmosphere within the unit, flexibility of the unit members and the amount, which soldiers perform without direct orders. This kind of behaviour affects the work-pressure of N.C.O's. Also sickness and the amount of 'traffic' accidents were used to indicate the mental state of the unit.

At last they were asked if this kind of mental effectivity measures could be used in the morale research. They answered that they also used the results of the morale research, but common sense is hard to measure in a questionnaire. They also use mental-training, which is also hard to measure. The only possibility could be questions about absenteeism because of illness.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 Recommendations regarding the quality of the morale research

The overall opinion of the respondents was clear and simple. They all recommend continuing the morale research. With implementing the recommendations the quality of this service will raise and they would be willing to use the morale measurements during future missions.

To improve the research it's recommended investigating the possibility of measuring morale once a year and during the mission. That way a unit commander always knows the state of mental health of his unit. . The unit itself gets used to it. Introducing becomes redundant and it's not necessary anymore to interfere in the preparation time for the mission. On the other hand it should be very well tuned with other kinds of research to avoid 'questionnaire-fatigue' within the unit. If measurement annually is not an option, it should be investigated in which way the morale research could be more embedded in the standard preparation for mission. It avoids the failure of bad introduction and everyone gets used to it. It also improves the way of communicating because of its familiarity. It is also recommended to cluster as much as possible other research to avoid overloading units with al different kind of research.

About the number of measurements, it should be the commander's decision whether he wants a third measurement at the end of the mission or not. This depends on the situation. The researchers involved also have the task to advise the commander in this matter. This implicates a close and open communication with the unit. This close contact also avoids failures in questionnaires and other misunderstandings up to important details. To communicate with the right person (for instance S1, commander or second in command) should take place in all cases to stay up to date and to create a good relationship with the unit, which is important for the meetings later on.

The way the results are presented to the commanders needs no change. To visit the unit in the mission area, even under difficult circumstances, is very important to the unit. It sends out trust and is a possibility for the researchers to identify with situation the unit is in. This is also important for the next recommendation.

According to the meetings in which results are presented, it could be investigated in which way the BSSC could anticipate in the need of coaching on different levels of command. Being a commander is often a

lonely job and especially during missions there is an increasing need to talk about matters of their concern like fear, failures or specific events. They need someone to listen, to advise and to coach without getting these subjects in the open. For that reason it's very hard to talk about these aspects with other unit-members or even another commander. The BSSC could partly fill in this need, but could certainly participate in active advice concerning this matter. This subject deserves more attention than it gets at the moment. This need is not only detected among higher rank officers but also occurs within NCO's. The need of coaching should get more discussion.

The last recommendation concerns the choice who has to be informed about the results of the measurements. According to the interviews the decision to inform others about unit results should be left to the unit-commander. In situations the unit-safety is in danger and the commander is not aware of it, it is up to the researchers to consider whether others should be informed or not about this rare and extraordinary situation.

4.2 Further recommendations

Unit-commanders are interested in trends based on data generated during the last decade of morale research.

Another suggestion is the developing of a standard model to select good leaders for units dedicated for missions. Another point of interest is the consequence of high and low pressure during missions on morale. This kind of analysis could be more developed and published. Last year the BSSC compared morale between units in high-risk operations and low risk operations.

The BSSC has to increase its network to stimulate the forces to contact BSSC if there are questions or needs according to the mental aspects of their units.

Another aspect is to predict the quality of a unit according to effectivity-measures. To develop a good model it's worthwhile to investigate which effectivity-measures could be used.

4.3 Conclusion

The results of the interviews confirm the opinion that the morale, 'will to fight' is an important and difficult matter for commanders. Morale research is a helpful tool to measure the mental state of a unit. The BSSC delivers an important contribution in measuring morale and can increase their contribution by:

- Intensifying contact with the unit during research even when it costs much time
- Developing more practical tools based on data and experience to assist the commander after results are presented
- Analysing trends and relations among factors who influence morale
- Investigating in which way coaching can be put into practice to assist commanders in their duty.

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